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Can Truth Hurt America?

The battle goes on: Has the press exercised fullest responsibility in the selection and publication of news which might be detrimental to national security? We don't want to print anything that will hurt the United States and would not knowingly do so.

President Kennedy, speaking to the American Newspaper Publishers' Association in New York Thursday, put it this way: "If the country is awaiting a declaration of war by the Soviet Union, then I can only say that no war has ever posed a greater threat to our security."

The President will probably not find a voice of dissent in the thousands of newspapers; wire services, magazines, and other news-gathering media. The problem is: What is in the national interest? What news could hurt national security?

Is it any less damaging to report missile test failures than to print that Cuban rebels were training in Florida — a fact which Castro himself was trumpeting in public, long before the American press repeated the story?

Is there any point to the government's inviting several hundred newspaper editors to a "briefing" on utmost security matters, only to have an Iron Curtain reporter seated among the audience?

The point is, the American press is a fragmented body, with newspapers operating independently of each other, just as industries do, or shopkeepers, or dentists. Yet, it is a press which with few exceptions, cherishes the degree of responsibility it has maintained.

For example, Florida newspaper editors tell that they voluntarily refused to print any stories about the recruiting, arming and training of Cuban exiles—until the story was broken in a newspaper "in the north east."

This point, too, must be considered: The news must come from somewhere, be it about missile launching specifics, the work of the CIA, in Miami, or whatever the story. The government agencies involved, the sole repositories of the factual information, should also be called on to exercise the responsibilities which the press is now asked to summon forth.

The problem is complex. The American system abhors government consorship, yet in the interest of national security, accepts the need for restriction of information. The press itself willingly accepts self-censorship as a measure of responsibility, but recognizes the infirmities and dangers of such a practice.

We do not suggest an answer to this dilemma, other than this observation: It is the philosophy of United States government information agencies to emphasize truth, not to gloss over weaknesses nor to exaggerate successes. If the government would recognize that the press follows the same practice, and would come up with some workable security formula within that framework, the press would certainly do its share.